

## **Facing September 16: political game of chess**

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The collection of events, views, comments that surround the forthcoming «Day X», September 16, when the opposition is expected to start its protest actions, may be compared to a game of chess, when competing teams of players play simultaneously at several chess-boards with candidates for becoming masters of protest «sports» and recognized holders of the chess «crowns».

Contradictions are visible both between and within the teams. Some steps look thoughtful, and they are met with counter-action, there are by-passing maneuvers, some steps look pretty spontaneous, and sometimes it looks as if the competitors deliberately lose to each other. Generally speaking, it looks like some of the players are more concerned about being involved than about actually winning the game...

### *Political Information Promos: Who Moves Faster?*

The first message about the plan to organize protest actions on September 16 was sent at the height of the «politically dead» summer season by Yulia Tymoshenko, Oleksandr Moroz and the Communists. The media largely ignored the announcement. According to Tymoshenko, Moroz and leader of Communists Petro Symonenko, they sought to counter attempts to stage the third term of Leonid Kuchma's presidency by means of organizing massive protest actions and the early presidential elections. The announcement was enhanced by comments of Roman Bezsmertnyi, political coordinator of Nasha Ukraina, who argued that the regime «cynically demonstrates complete unwillingness to enter a dialogue with political forces that have announced their alternative position». He added that such an attitude pushed Nasha Ukraina to the choice of «using extreme measures of countering the existing regime» (Zerkalo Nedeli, July 27, 2002). Later on, at a joint press conference of Tymoshenko, Moroz, Symonenko and Bezsmertnyi on September 2, it was announced that the agreement about the joint protest actions had been signed on July 21. There is no official signature of the leader of Nasha Ukraina on the final version of the agreement (see «Tovarysh», № 36, September 2002). The information, again, was practically ignored by the media, except a few information agencies.

The goal of the action was defined as «mobilizing efforts of millions of people for urgent settlement of ripe political and socio-economic problems that have acquired extremely threatening forms. Nowadays the first-turn political necessity is the change of the system of government and dismissal of President Leonid Kuchma» («Tovarysh», № 36, September 2002).

On August 15 Roman Bezsmertnyi called on the Communist Party, the Socialists and the

Yulia Tymoshenko block to avoid differences in preparing actions against President Kuchma. meanwhile, on August 19 activists of «Ukraine without Kuchma» movement called on the three parties to organize a joint rally and initiate early presidential elections with limiting the president's powers, on September 16, the second anniversary of kidnapping of an opposition journalist of the Ukrainska Pravda webzine, Georgy Gongadze.

While the calls and slogans of the opposition have been natural, their announcement was viewed rather differently by those who could hear it. As Olena Zvarych wrote in the Ukrainska Pravda on September 3, 2002, «the depth of the idea – the announcement of a nation-wide September revolution at the height of the season of picking cucumbers through the Zerkalo Nedeli that is not disseminated at cucumber plantations – has struck me with its irrational mystery... The idea became known in narrow circles and did not gain strength». Other observers pointed out to other mistakes in announcing the actions that a priori reduced the potential impact. In his article «Weird Revolution» (Ukrainska Pravda, August 7, 2002), Volodymyr Fesenko asked: «Who would announce the day of the action and details of its preparation plans? That removed the element of surprise, and the opposing party receives a chance to prepare well for the future fight... obviously, we are living in the «PR era». It is unclear, though, how effective was that PR effort, as the media reacted to it with silence. Possibly, the summer announcements could be seen as counter-measures caused by actions of the regime to initiate criminal investigation against some businesses close to Nasha Ukraina and Yulia Tymoshenko. On August 2, Attorney General of Ukraine initiated two criminal cases against Yulia Tymoshenko. The situation added a new dimension of the «game of chess» and some tension in relations between the three opposition forces.

At the end of August the formal request to grant permission for arrest of Tymoshenko arrived to the parliament. It is still unclear how the Communists will react, given their declared commitment to «fight oligarchs». On August 23 Petro Symonenko said that the Communist faction's position on the issue «should not be influenced» by the fact of partnership in the protest actions: «if someone is guilty he should be held responsible». The joint press conference on September 2 did not make the Communists' view on the «Tymoshenko case» clearer, and it is hard to say whether the Communist faction will vote in favor of stripping Tymoshenko of parliamentary immunity.

Meanwhile, Leonid Kuchma made a fast and unexpected step. On August 23 he publicly announced that the protest actions would be organized «with the black money», and «the people should be aware of that». Speaker Volodymyr Lytvyn added that the opposition parties' plans to organize actions against Kuchma prove their weakness, and called on discussing actions of the authorities that might cause dissatisfaction of the people instead of encouraging the people to protest. On August 24 president Kuchma called for a profound political reform that should result in transforming Ukraine into a parliamentary-presidential republic. Thus, he hijacked the strongest message of the opposition.

*Two Steps Forward, A Step Back*

The social and political initiatives, voiced by President Kuchma, coincided, in a certain way, with the tasks outlined by the address of the three opposition forces on July 21. Their statement called for changing the Constitution in order to balance the branches of power and raise social guarantees. The opposition, for instance, promised to «increase minimum wages and pensions to the levels of minimum living standards», and the President pointed out to the need to undertake a pension reform; the opposition demanded «strict observance of the right of citizens for education and medical service», and the President promised to do the same.

All components of the political autumn- 2002 fit into a general situation as follows: the start of the parliamentary session, discussions about prospects for forming a «parliamentary majority» and a «coalition government». The plans were announced by the President as urgent, even without taking into account the need to amend the Constitution to carry them out. The latter was seen critically both by the President's opponents and his supporters.

According to Permanent Representative of the President at the parliament, Oleksandr Zadorozhnyi, «the majority» in the parliament exists and currently numbers 231. Obviously, it would be impossible to have so many supporters of «the majority» without some members of Nasha Ukraina, alleged collaborators of the former «Yedyna Ukraina». However, according to Viktor Yushchenko, there are «no ... our MPs» in the list of the President's 231 men. («Segodnya», September 6, 2002). In addition to summer visits of members of Nasha Ukraina to see Kuchma in the Crimea during his vacations, On August 30 Yushchenko met Kuchma and Lytvyn to discuss the need to form an effective and steady majority in the parliament. According to Lytvyn, the President agreed that a government should be formed «to fit that majority».

On September 2 the Tymoshenko block, the Communists and the Socialists confirmed their plans to start the protest actions, «Rise, Ukraine!», on September 16. As Tymoshenko put it, the three forces had worked on all the documents together and were ready «for very serious steps for changing the proportions in Ukraine's societal life» (UNIAN, September 2, 2002). The actions will be coordinated by a coordination council that consists of leaders of political forces that signed the political agreement. Leaders of the opposition «take responsibility for strict observance of constitutional rights during the action», the agreement states. The document is open for signature by «all political forces that share the intentions it declares». The organizers of the protest actions called on all opposition democratic forces to participate in preparing and undertaking the actions. The meeting was not attended, though, by Viktor Yushchenko, while it had been announced that all leaders of the four opposition forces would participate. Noteworthy, on August 29 Yushchenko publicly announced that he had no obligations to any other political force about actions on the day of September 16 (UNIAN, September 2, 2002). Nasha Ukraina intends to decide on whether or not to take part in the actions at its Forum of Democratic Forces on September 15. Meanwhile, Roman Bezsmertnyi earlier argued since the people who had voted for Nasha Ukraina would take part in the actions, the block cannot just stay aside.

### *Nasha Ukraina: Views on September 16*

The Ukrainian opposition has its own history of evolution from radical to constructive, but in any case it is adequate to the current regime and a derivative from it. The opposition in Ukraine is generated by the regime, and partly it is a former regime. To a certain extent this factor explains specific features and weaknesses of the Ukrainian opposition that may be seen as the process of general mimicry and symbiosis with the regime. One of the issues of debate in this sense is the views of different political forces that comprise Nasha Ukraina and Viktor Yushchenko himself on the September 16 events.

When politicians began to come back from their summer vacations, they express a broad variety of views on the plans of protest actions. For instance, Hennady Udovenko on August 22 said he had doubts about that the protest actions would succeed. He said he worried that the actions would not get the support expected by the organizers. «Should there be 100 thousand people «in the street» I would have no doubt,» he added, commenting on prospects for involvement of his party, the People's Rukh of Ukraine, in the actions ([www.korrespondent.net](http://www.korrespondent.net), August 22, 2002).

It is unclear to what extent Nasha Ukraina is committed to the actions and how far it is planning to go. On September 5, 2002, during the mourning ceremony in Lviv to commemorate the victims of the plane crash during the demonstration show in July, leaders of Nasha Ukraina reportedly made some political statements. According to *Ukrainska Pravda* (September 5), Viktor Yushchenko, Yuri Kostenko and Viktor Pynzenyk spoke in a way that suggested the block would not take part in the actions of September 16. Meanwhile, they hinted they might join the protest actions later. According to leader of the Party of Reforms and Order Viktor Pynzenyk, the party decided to formally address the block's political council on that matter, «but life does not end on [September] 16». The day before, though, it was reported that the Party of Reforms and Order and the Rukh (Kostenko) announced that would participate in the September 16 actions. The other Rukh (Udovenko), reportedly, did that earlier ([www.korrespondent.net](http://www.korrespondent.net), September 4). The source also quoted press secretary of the Rukh (Kostenko), Iryna Lukomska, as saying that the Central Provid (board) of the Rukh had decided to take part in the actions but did not specify the date. The parties that comprised Nasha Ukraina found a compromise: it was announced that «each regional party organization will decide independently about the date and time of participation in the opposition actions».

The July 21 agreement stated that «political forces - organizers of the action take the obligation not to enter separate negotiations with the regime <...> party interests and personal ambitions of the leaders during the action should not interfere with achievement of its common goal»... (see the text of the political agreement in «Tovarysh», #36, September 2002). This makes understandable the absence of Viktor Yushchenko's signature under the document. On September 3, he stated support for the «Rise, Ukraine!» but announced the block would refrain from confrontation with Kuchma until the President responded to the demands of the block, expressed in Yushchenko's letter

last week. The demands focused on free formation of the majority in the parliament based on Nasha Ukraina, and giving the majority the right to form the Cabinet of Ministers.

While the four opposition forces may agree on their final goals and situationally agree on their strategies, it looks like they have different views on tactics. The situation is further complicated by the prospects for the early presidential elections. In this case the position of the Prime Minister can be seen as a sure spring-board for a future presidential hopeful.

Final conclusions about the degree to which Nasha Ukraina will be involved in the protest actions made be based on conclusions of the September 15 People's Forum «For Democratic Development of Ukraine», initiated by Nasha Ukraina. Tymoshenko and Moroz have confirm their decision to participate in the Forum. Symonenko, mayor of Kyiv Oleksandr Omelchenko and former Speaker Ivan Pliushch, also invited to the Forum, have not responded yet. According to leader of Nasha Ukraina's group «Razom», Oleg Rybachuk, the person responsible for organizing the Forum, President Kuchma also received an invitation but no official reaction has followed yet.

### *Facing September 16*

It is hard to predict how successful the opposition will be in bringing the people to the streets on September 16. Yulia Tymoshenko announced on September 4 that the opposition cannot give «100% guarantee» that the nation-wide protest action «Rise, Ukraine!» will be successful and supported by the people ([www.korrespondent.net](http://www.korrespondent.net), September 5, 2002). Some preliminary actions have already taken place in the regions. An opposition rally in Rivne was attended by, according to different estimates, from 2.5 to 5 thousand people. 7 thousand protested at the central square of Chernihiv. On September 4, 3.5 thousand took part in a rally for dismissing Leonid Kuchma in Zhytomyr. According to a recent opinion poll conducted by the Democratic Initiatives and the Socis firm, 19% of their respondents are prepared to participate in the protest actions, and 31% are ready to be involved depending on what the rallies are for or against. 40% of the respondents are strongly opposed to taking part in the protest actions. 10% did not respond. The opinion poll was taken on September 16-19, 2002 and covered 2,000 respondents in different regions of Ukraine.

According to Oleksandr Moroz, some «Russian political technologists» are «preparing for September 16 provocation against the opposition», the regime is preparing counter-measures and provocation against the opposition's actions. The opinion looks even more noteworthy given the recent statement of Minister of the Interior Yuri Smirnov who claimed that his ministry had information that «psychopaths and people with aggressive inclinations» have shown interest to the actions (Forum, September 5, 2002). He argued the actions had attracted attention of criminals and hooligans and some jobless individuals that make their living by causing trouble. It is worrying that the Minister of the Interior referred to the clashes during previous massive actions of the opposition on March 9, 2001. «Given the experience of previous years, [we] pay attention to possible negative implications of the mass actions for civic order and security of the people,» the statement of the Ministry of the Interior read, calling on Ukrainians not to follow

«provocation of extremist-minded individuals». hence, the events are a priori seen by the law-enforcement authorities as extremist.

The actions and their impact will largely depend on the media. Given the recently published «orders» to the media from the Presidential Administration about the way what and in what way should be covered in the news, the media may largely distort public impression of the actions. Presently one may expect new steps made by the teams on the «chess-board». Both players and imitators are waiting to continue their games.